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Documenting and Preserving Texas Freedom Colonies

*A descendant of African-American settlers takes on
the task of locating these often-forgotten places.*

By Andrea R. Roberts, Ph.D.

In 1870, former slaves owned two percent of farmland in Texas, and 50 years later, that number had risen to more than 26 percent. This history of African-American placemaking, though, is overshadowed by the myth that following Emancipation, all newly freed Black men and women moved to cities for domestic work or became sharecroppers.

The truth, however, is that from 1866 through 1920, many African

Americans formed settlements “in places where whites were not looking,” claiming spaces in rural areas, on the edge of former plantations, and near the outskirts of cities.¹ Properties were attained through cash purchase, adverse possession (also known as squatter’s rights), or pre-emption, which made public land for homesteading available to Blacks. By these means, African Americans in Texas obtained acreage and organized self-sufficient agrarian communities at a rate far surpassing that of other Black Belt states.

These fringe settlements, while spread throughout the state, were primarily concentrated in East Texas. A variety of factors, however, prompted the dispersal of emancipated Blacks and their

families and contributed to the invisibility and vulnerability of these communities, which came to be known as Freedom Colonies. Within the Lone Star State, the location and current status of many of these settlements remain unknown.

WHY A TEXAS FREEDOM COLONIES PROJECT?

I am a Black Texan who traces her origins back to the 1830s in Fort Bend County, a descendant of people who helped create and sustain Freedom Colonies. That heritage, in part, influences my perspective as a researcher, planning administrator, and preservationist. My professional experience has revealed that for annexed or unincorporated areas, particularly

Above: Often a destination at the end of an isolated dirt road, though sometimes found in urban locations, Freedom Colonies are hidden African-American cultural legacies. These endangered communities are in need of greater visibility and a broader stewardship. All images are courtesy of Andrea Roberts, Ph.D.



Pleasant Hill C.M.E. Church, Farrsville settlement, in Newton County, is where descendants gather for annual “homecomings,” a traditional celebration of faith, family, and shared heritage. Attendees of these events are a valuable resource for documenting Freedom Colony cultural history. Images on this page and opposite were originally in color.

those places in the way of development, recognition of heritage and preservation of historically significant structures can be challenging.

Freedom Colonies are vulnerable because their cultural origins and residents (particularly descendants of founding families) are not easily identifiable. These organized communities typically have undocumented borders, vanishing settlement patterns, and wide-ranging levels of population, which complicates study and preservation.

My work as a planning professional brought some of those issues to my attention. Others I learned through academic work and as I got to know descendants of Freedom Colony founders in Deep East Texas. Their dedication to revitalizing and preserving these distinctive cultural communities inspired me to frame my research within the context of an extended and

evolving investigation and social justice initiative.

The Texas Freedom Colonies Project (TFCP) seeks to document the history of African-American placemaking by recording settlement names and locations, along with their related origin stories and cultural practices. Studies also will identify and address current preservation efforts and planning issues with the realization that those could change with time to reflect new challenges and opportunities. Ideally, the TFCP will serve as a center for research to support more effective historic preservation and heritage conservation efforts within Freedom Colonies.

CHALLENGES TO FREEDOM COLONY PRESERVATION

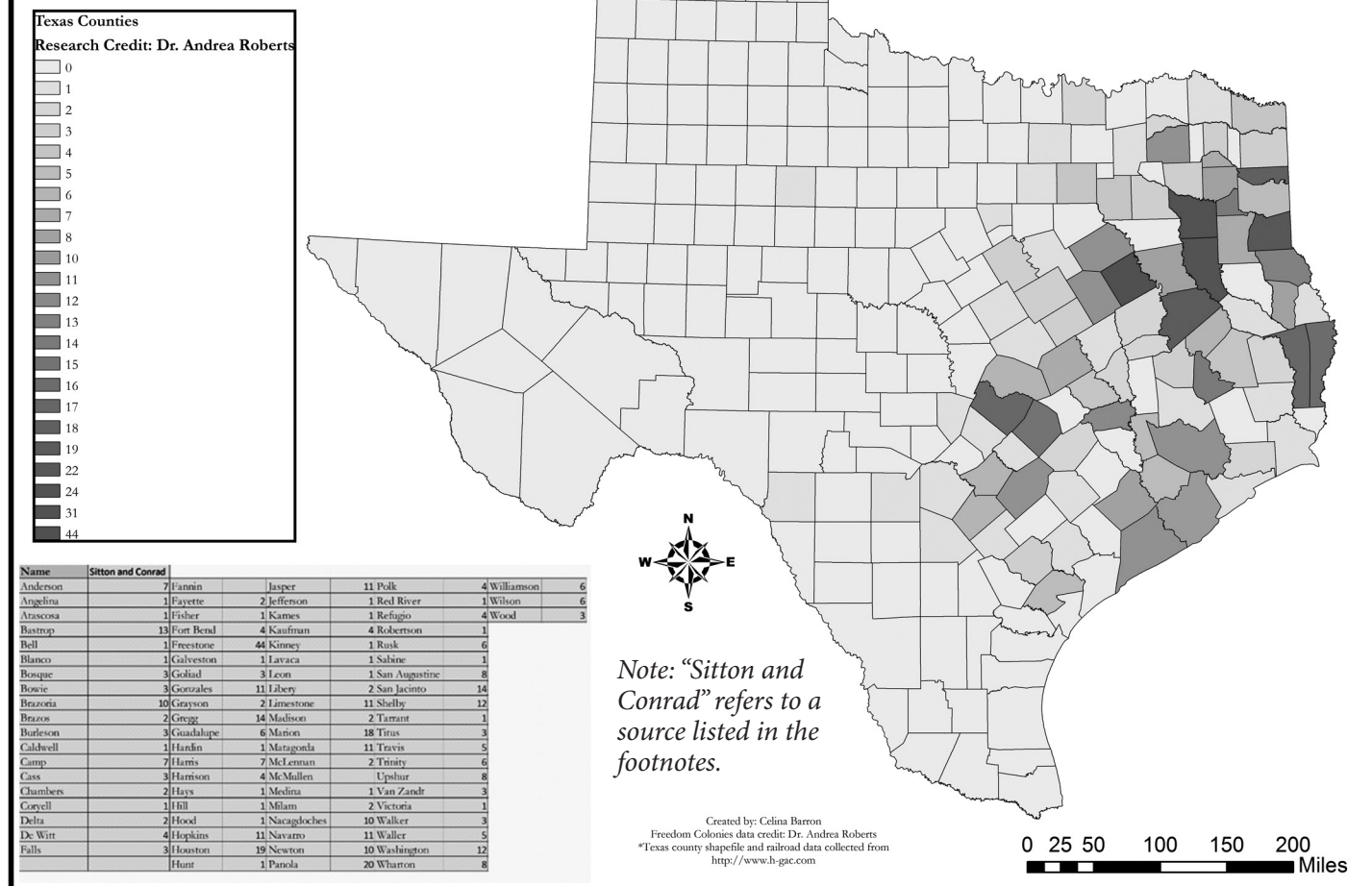
Texas Freedom Colonies face three obstacles, namely visibility, access, and vulnerability. Recogni-

tion of these communities is better described as overcoming “invisibility.” Though the desire to go unnoticed once kept Black landowners safe, these settlements remain largely unnoticed because they are not officially recognized as “places.”² Most colony names are known only because of oral history, as many were annexed by cities or hidden within identified unincorporated areas. Additionally, some communities are absent from maps because their small populations fell well below the U.S. Census Bureau’s threshold for Census Designated Place (CDP).³

This lack of attention hampers assistance. Planning officials and preservation organizations often do not recognize Freedom Colonies as locations with an active constituency and heritage. Groups that might be helpful often cannot identify which places are at risk or how to leverage community activities such as cemetery preservation, oral history projects, heritage tourism, and economic revitalization initiatives. Even when known to authorities and preservationists, Freedom Colonies are commonly viewed only as historical areas and not as engaged communities to be included in formal planning processes.

Awareness of where a colony exists, or in some cases, once was located, opens the door to access. Gaining invited entry into a colony’s social system, to speak with those who call these places “home,” or to observe shared traditions is

Texas Freedom Colonies: Total Located



key to understanding these places and their history. Often, gathering information requires going beyond a settlement's boundaries to locate former residents now living elsewhere. However, planners (and preservationists) are not trained to identify and engage with resident and non-resident descendants. In addition, because a settlement's history often is passed down through family oral tradi-

Above: Gray and black shaded areas of the map indicate Texas counties with identified Freedom Colony locations. Also included is a listing of the number of sites per county. The graphic is based upon Texas Freedom Colonies Project research. Original in color.

tion, Freedom Colony information is at risk as the descendants of founders pass on or relocate.

Discussions with East Texas Freedom Colony homeowners and local preservation groups revealed that there is also a lack of access to the financial means and expertise needed to support surveying, rehabilitation, or stewardship of endangered historic buildings. Communal ownership of family or shared anchor sites makes these places ineligible for federal assistance and grants. Only recently have libraries and nonprofits worked to develop archives related to cemeteries, schools, professional cooperatives, and lodges—often the last African-American heri-

tage sites remaining within Freedom Colonies.

The challenges of overcoming invisibility and tapping into available resources, along with gentrification and related pressures, make Freedom Colony cultural assets vulnerable to destruction or erasure. Settlement founders did not always register the land on which they squatted.⁴ For family heirs, land title status, absentee ownership, and intimidation and trickery yielded "dead" assets (property held without a legally recognized title) and land loss. This resulted in a decline of descendant presence within a settlement.⁵ Ultimately, the forfeiture of family-owned lands has left these communities

with fewer core residents to sustain, steward, or preserve historical structures.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

While cultural resource managers often document African-American settlements in cultural resource surveys, these areas rarely are integrated into local or regional planning processes for future land use. Additionally, although the Texas Historical Commission Historic Sites Atlas includes several freedom communities, an interactive map of all settlements is not yet available. As a result, interventions, such as protective land measures or preservation efforts, are reactive—prompted by development, changes in land use, or sophisticated descendants. Proactive steps are required, including the creation of a centralized Freedom Colony database, addi-

tional programs to survey these cultural assets, greater outreach to local governments, and increased professional instruction related to working with descendants and dispersed constituencies.

Establishing these resources is the work being taken up by the Texas Freedom Colonies Project and other partners across the state to ensure that the voices of these ancestors and descendants are heard. By doing so, the story of African-American placemaking becomes visibly enriched both within these communities and as part of the state's written historical record.

Andrea R. Roberts, Ph.D., will be continuing the work of the Texas Freedom Colonies Project as an assistant professor of landscape architecture and urban planning at Texas A&M University this fall.

Sources:

- ¹ Deborah J. Hoskins, *Separate Streams of Discourse: Identity and the Rise of the Corporate State in East Texas, 1919-1935* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1993).
- ² Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad, "Freedom Colonies Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow," 2005, 18.
- ³ U.S. Census Bureau, *Geographic Areas Reference Manual* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).
- ⁴ Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad, "Freedom Colonies Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow," 2005, 4.
- ⁵ Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in The West and Fails Everywhere Else*.

TEXAS FREEDOM COLONIES PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS, RESEARCH, AND INITIATIVES

The Texas Freedom Colonies Project studies and documents evidence of place found in descendants' rituals, celebrations, and oral traditions. These are activities that sustain commitments to a settlement's survival, even as physical evidence of that community vanish. To date, the Project has:

- Built a growing database of 550+ Freedom Colonies names;
- Mapped 25 newly identified settlements in Newton and Jasper counties;
- Documented descendants' origin stories, place-based memories, contemporary preservation practices, and cultural landscape(s) through memory mapping tours and event observation;
- Detected strategies descendants use to prevent land loss and build intergenerational wealth in Jasper County;
- Chronicled traditions used to transfer cultural and social memory to youth; and
- Identified planning and policy issues requiring further research, including land loss, access to services, and the ways preservation policy and organizations reinforce inequalities.

To learn more about the project and read Texas Freedom Colony stories, visit www.thetexasfreedomcoloniesproject.com.

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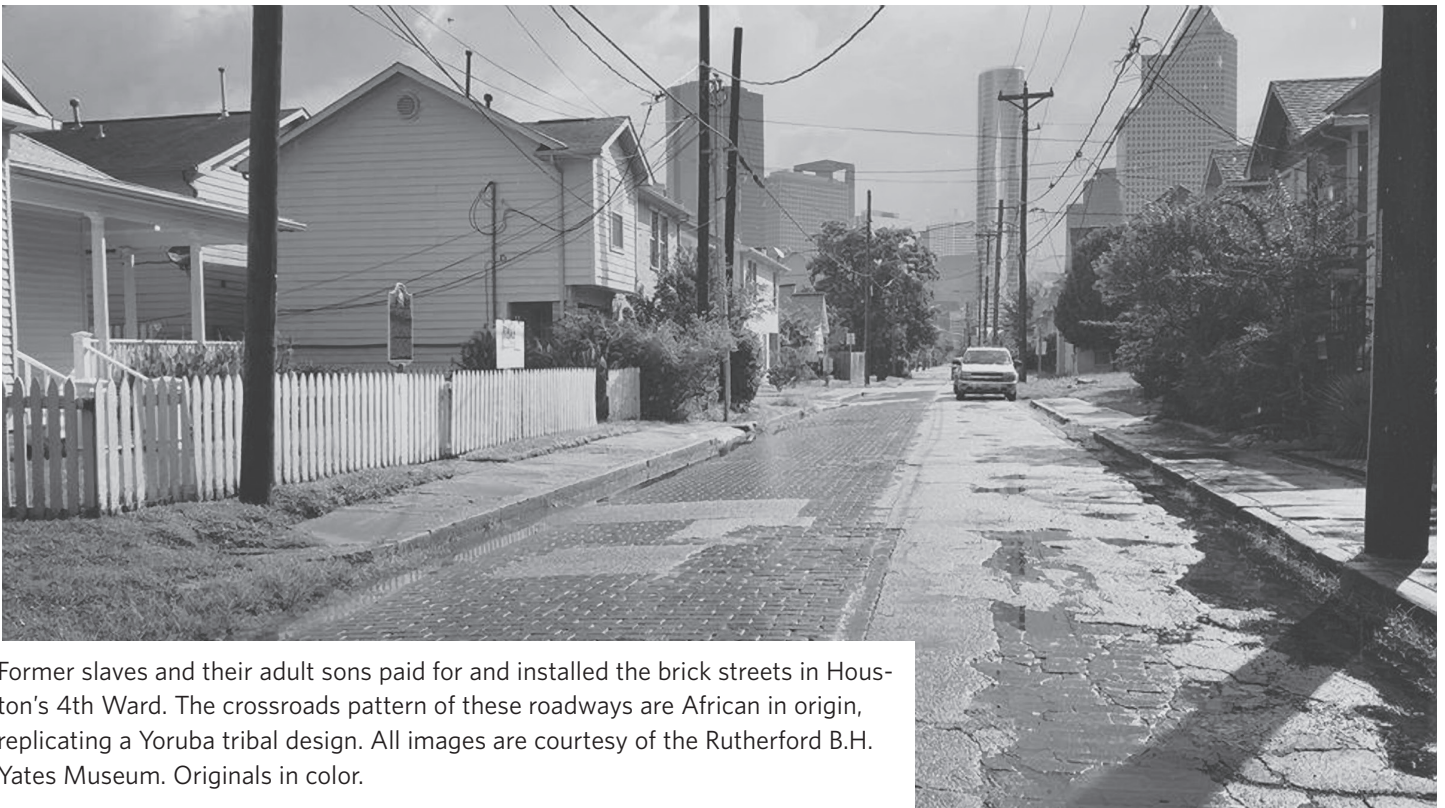
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Victories and Setbacks in Houston's Freedmen's Town

The Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum (RBHYM), in Houston's 4th Ward, is working tirelessly—and with assistance from preservation partners—to ensure that the path laid by freed men and women remains forever visible, knowable, and celebrated. Since 1996, the organization has pursued its mission to acquire, restore, and repurpose six historic properties as a complex of museums that reconstruct and accurately communicate the heritage story that founded and sustains Freedmen's Town, a designated National Register Historic District. Marking RBHYM's most recent timeline are events that serve as examples of the roles visibility, access, and vulnerability play in preserving Freedom Colony communities.



Former slaves and their adult sons paid for and installed the brick streets in Houston's 4th Ward. The crossroads pattern of these roadways are African in origin, replicating a Yoruba tribal design. All images are courtesy of the Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum. Originals in color.

November 2016:

During excavation for a repair project adjacent to Andrews Street in Freedmen's Town, a contractor unintentionally damaged a portion of the century-old brick road that was hand-constructed by ex-slaves and their descendants. Protecting this vulnerable infrastructure remains an ongoing challenge. While the City of Houston requires that special care be taken when repairs or improvements are done within the National Register Historic District, incidents like

this have occurred all too often in recent years.

According to Catherine Roberts, RBHYM co-founder, damage and loss to endangered assets like the hand-laid brick road can be prevented, but only if all parties involved—city officials, private contractors, preservation professionals, and residents—are informed and working together. Current laws, she said, must be made more “enforceable and meaningful” to cultivate that more cohesive way of doing things.

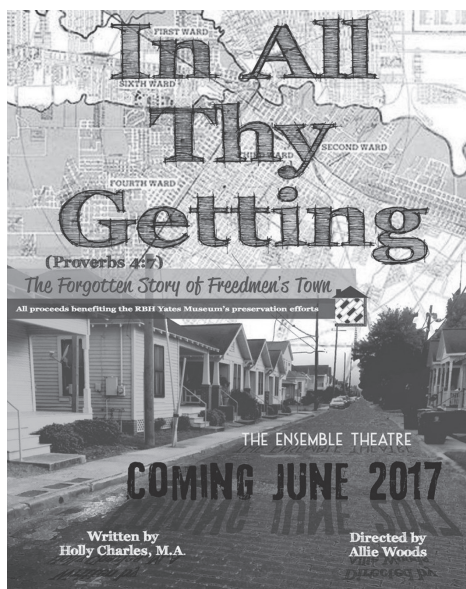


The J. Vance Lewis Home is currently undergoing restoration.

April 2017:

With multiple site restorations to achieve, the R.B.H. Yates Museum describes the process as “the slow, careful progress of historic preservation.” Ensuring an authentic rehabilitation of these landmarks requires the acquisition of funding, which in turn takes time and cultivation of resources. Recently, the Texas Historical Foundation awarded RBHYM financial assistance for roof protection on the J. Vance Lewis Homestead, a designated city landmark.

Admitted to the Texas Bar in 1904, Lewis gained recognition as the first African-American lawyer to win a case before a Harris County jury in favor of a Black client accused of murder. In 1907, the attorney and his wife Pauline, a schoolteacher, built “Van Court,” a one-story wood frame cottage, that served as their home and his law office. Once restoration of that structure is complete, the Lewis Homestead will become the Museum of Legal Professions and Educators.



June 2017:

This summer's debut of the original play *In All Thy Getting: The Forgotten Story of Freedmen's Town* is a significant achievement to add to Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum's ever-growing list of accomplishments. The production is the work of Houston native and playwright Holly Charles, M.A., and is directed by Allie Woods, Jr., a descendant of a Freedmen's Town founding family. Proceeds from performances are earmarked for RBHYM preservation projects. In *Houston Style Magazine*, Charles spoke of the greater benefit of dramatizing the struggles of living freely after Emancipation. “I offer this play as a reminder to all of us about the power of the people, the power of perseverance and, finally, the power of preservation.”

Undoubtedly, these same principles have guided the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum throughout the organization's decades-long journey to honor the past.—*Pamela Murtha*